



Jodi Lou Rickert and husband Ray with their daughter, Sophie, and dog, Phoebe

Jodi Lou Rickert

Leaving her legacy in the fight against lung cancer

By Mollie Shambeau

In April 2008, Jodi Lou Rickert wrote a letter to family and friends. She begins, “Dreaming...you think of dreaming what your life will be like 15 years from now. I never dreamt that I’d join such a fight in all of my life.

“I’ll make my story brief...[in February 2006,] at the age of 34, I was diagnosed with non-small cell adenocarcinoma, otherwise known as lung cancer. As you can imagine, I had several shocks. The toughest one: Telling my husband of three years and father of our 8 ½-month-old daughter, [Sophie], that I may be dying.”

Jodi Lou’s husband, Ray—technology coordinator for the Barneveld School District—recalls how events unfolded. “She had lower back pain and a cough,” he says. After a routine chest X-ray showed a spot on her lung the size of a quarter. Jodi Lou was told she had cancer, and that it had spread.

Even more perplexing than being diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer was the fact that Jodi Lou had been a healthy, non-smoker all her life. “The news came as a complete disbelief,” she recounts in her letter. “I became astonishingly aware that lung cancer is not just a smoker’s disease...I always say ‘I went in with a cough and came out with cancer.’”

Despite the news, Jodi Lou’s determination was evident from the start. “All through [the chemotherapy and radiation], she kept saying, ‘If I get through this, I’m going to talk [to people], you know. *Do something.*’” Ray says.

That “something” dawned on the pair in January 2008 during a drive up north to visit family. “We were in the car and she said again, ‘I really want to do something,’” Ray remembers. “I rattled off, ‘How about the Jodi Lou Lung Cancer Foundation?’ Instantly she said, ‘I like that.’ And the ball started rolling with getting a

nonprofit started.”

Jodi Lou’s mission was threefold. First, she and Ray worked with the UW Foundation to put their dollars toward lung cancer research, with the goal of getting clinical trial medication in the hands of patients.

Second, Jodi Lou was set on increasing awareness. “Jodi was adamant—and so am I—about getting the word out that this is everybody’s problem,” Ray says. “Everybody can get lung cancer.”

“I went in with a cough and came out with cancer.”

Jodi Lou’s third, and most heart-wrenching, goal was to save another parent the pain of having to say goodbye to their child.

Her letter reads, “I’ve asked myself what can I do to help spare just one mother or father from having to say goodbye to their children, sacrificing their dreams and housing sadness in their heart as I do.”

The answer, of course, was leaving her legacy with the Jodi Lou Lung Cancer Foundation. With donations pouring in, Ray and Jodi Lou planned to host a fundraising run/walk on June 6, 2008.

Sadly, a little over a month before the event—mere weeks after she wrote her letter—Jodi Lou passed away. Ray made the decision to continue with the event.

The outpouring of community support was astounding, and a year later at the 2009 run/walk, support grew. “It’s exciting being a part of it because its kind of—no pun intended—gotten a life of its own,” Ray says. “We were able to, in an economy that’s sliding downhill, increase our numbers and raise money. That was really a statement. This is solid. This [foundation] isn’t going to go away.”

The final component? Involving Jodi Lou and Ray’s daughter, Sophie, now 4. “She knows mama’s story and that mama died from lung cancer and we need to do this to raise money for lung cancer,” Ray says. “The next big step is when she’s comfortable talking about it. I can only hope that [this legacy] will help her deal with the fact she lost her mom.”

He continues, “[If Jodi could see us now], she’d be going, ‘Ray get your papers organized!’ But after that I think she’d be very happy where things have gone.” And, of course, the places they’ll go in the future.

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